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## Do We Need a New Approach to Christian Leadership Development?

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## INTERVIEW WITH ERICH BAUMGARTNER

# DO WE NEED A NEW APPROACH TO CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT?

*Dr. Baumgartner, a native of Austria, has published on cross-cultural transitions, leadership and change, and subjects of organizational growth. He has translated several works related to church growth. He served as the 16th president of the American Society for Church Growth (now Great Commission Research Network), an interdenominational organization founded in 1986 by C. Peter Wagner. Prior to coming to Andrews University, Erich served as a pastor in Vienna and Salzburg, Austria, in Los Angeles, California, and as director of the Church Leadership Development Institute in Portland, Oregon, and Moscow, Russia. He also developed the Adventist Statistics Database that keeps track of the growth of the Seventh-day Adventist Church worldwide.*

*Erich teaches in leadership and intercultural communication and directs the Ph.D. in Leadership Program at Andrews University. He combines his interest in Intercultural Communication with his passion to develop organizational leaders. This is reflected in the two core courses he teaches on leadership theory and on diversity and culture. In the course Issues in Leadership Theory he introduces experienced leadership professionals to the universe of theory. His Seminar on Diversity, Leadership and Culture brings participants face-to-face with the realities of our global workplace. Most of his recent time, however, has been spent working with doctoral students on their dissertation research and serving as senior editor of the Journal of Applied Christian Leadership.*

**JACL:** If someone asked you what is leadership development, how would it be characterized?

**Baumgartner:** First, we are talking about leadership development in a Christian context, that is, development of people who acknowledge Christ as their Savior and Lord. Therefore, we need to start with an understanding of what is Christian leadership. Christian leadership, according to J. Clinton, is a person with a God-given capacity and responsibility to influence a group of believers towards the fulfillment of His purposes. Leadership development, then, does not start in a vacuum. It builds on a process that has already begun by God himself. Through training events or activities in our leadership devel-

opment program, for example, we are creating a context which intensifies the development processes which increases the capacity to influence.

But here is where things get a little bit more confusing. How seriously do we take the question of God's purposes? In the Seminary, the focus is on the ability to understand Scripture, and that is a good thing. When the pastors go out, however, they often are not well-prepared to deal with the world. They have studied the message of the Christian church but not the world in which the message should be given. The notion that preaching alone will automatically change things has been found to be rather naïve. The world has changed dramatically and has left the church unprepared. One of the purposes of leadership development today is actually to increase the capacity of the leader to bring change—personal change, group change and organizational change.

**JACL:** Who is responsible for developing leaders? Numbers of individuals are called to be pastors but that does not necessarily mean they've gone through professional leadership development training.

**Baumgartner:** The church has assumed that the Seminary curriculum includes the development of leaders. But those successful pastors, denominational leaders, and leaders of Christian institutions and enterprises often discover that they are not prepared for the leadership aspects of their jobs.

Another important aspect relates to what is the mission of the church for which we are preparing leaders. Is it just to maintain the status quo? Or is it to bring change? The world of the 21st century is different than even the last decades of the 20th century. While loyalty to institutions is waning, we have experienced tremendous contextual change. Amidst the constant change, a new type of leader is necessary. Leaders that can turn around churches, leaders that are able to fulfill God's mission in a new way and a new context are needed.

**JACL:** So the leaders are expected to do more than just lead. The bar is quite high, don't you think?

**Baumgartner:** Amidst the secular realm we are beginning to understand that church has always been about change. When you think about the transformation of a non-believer into a disciple of Christ, there is personal change and growth. But leadership is not only about helping individuals grow. There is a larger dimension involved, the mission of God in the world. Leadership goes beyond change of individuals learning to love God. Leadership is about bringing a whole people group together to do what we cannot do alone. When we

work together, we can do things that are much richer than what one of us could do alone. Leadership development aims to learn to lead organizations, institutions, movements or causes where we have to work together in different ways so that the larger mission is accomplished. It's the larger mission of God that ultimately needs to be the focus.

**JACL:** So we are not talking just about growing new leaders, are we? Working in a team requires continual learning.

**Baumgartner:** Our university has invested a lot of resources in researching how leaders actually develop. In the School of Education, of which I am part, there has been a relentless focus on learning. In the last decades we have learned a lot about how people actually learn. Not every leadership development program is effective. Billions of dollars are spent on leadership development programs, so it is appropriate to do it more effectively.

**JACL:** You are probably referring to something more than just passing along information, right?

**Baumgartner:** Passing along information may be the most important dimension in the informal leadership program. But typical organizations want leadership skills.

**JACL:** And then we hear also about leadership competencies.

**Baumgartner:** Yes, competencies combine two things—knowledge and skills. Companies have competency-based programs where there is learning to do the job well and no university degree is required. In the competency-based leadership program, however, we combine knowledge and skills in addition to a third element, which I would call attitudes and values.

That brings us back to Christian leadership development. How do we lead in the best way to express God's love for humanity? This is not necessarily part of every formal training program or even part of every non-formal training program.

Values are modeled to us. We can talk about them, reflect on them but modeling comes in a different way. A parent does not tell their son, "Today I will teach you the value of honesty." Understanding often comes in unexpected ways. A parent is paying a cashier and the cashier gives him back \$10 more. If he goes out of the store and tells his son, "Hey, the cashier gave me back \$10 more so let's get some ice cream," the parent has just taught his son

a value of dishonesty. He taught his son to take advantage of a cashier's mistake. But if the parent explains to his son, "Look, we got \$10 more than we should. Let's go back because it is not our money," he has been taught a good value by modeling.

**JACL:** On the other hand, change is not always valued among Christians as they are often afraid of changes that will make them world-like. Doesn't this subtle fear of change make it more difficult for leaders?

**Baumgartner:** God has given us the Gospel of Jesus Christ and there is no other Gospel than that. Paul is very strong when he says that even if an angel from heaven comes with another Gospel, may he be anathema. Yes, we are also called to preserve God's truth about the Gospel and Jesus Christ.

**Jesus used many opportunities to show that outside the walls they built there were very serious and beloved people that, in God's eyes, were just as readily accepted as his children as the people of God themselves.**

When Jesus came to the earth, there were a lot of things that needed to change—how Jewish believers viewed themselves as exclusive recipients of God's truth, and how they viewed others with prejudice. Jesus used many opportunities to show that outside the walls they built were very serious and beloved people that, in God's eyes, were just as readily accepted as his children as were the people of God themselves. His leadership task was to reform their understanding about God.

He did it by asking questions, which is a tremendous leadership development skill. Such a skill assumes however that while we do know something about God, we do not know everything, and we are constant learners. This is what Jesus modeled to us. When he told stories, he was taking very seriously the place from which people came, their history, etc. He did that to develop habits of thinking, questioning and learning on a much deeper level than mere catechumen methods that rabbis of those days used. They focused on transmitting the old without adding anything new to it. It is amazing, however, to see how these traditions that were so central about the Gospel of Jesus Christ and him as the Lamb of God did not allow them to see the Lamb of God right in front of them. They were celebrating Passover—the event that was given to explain the death of Jesus—while killing Jesus.

Leadership development has something to do with helping people to see the Gospel in a fresh way and at the same with asking what is God's will and

mission right now. As the world is constantly changing, leaders need to constantly learn about the world in which we live.

**JACL:** Jesus is an example of good leadership development. He led people to live *in* the world but not to be *of* the world.

**Baumgartner:** Jesus developed leaders (apostles, or disciples) in a way that they would be able to lead his work after his departure. By looking at how he was training the disciples, we gain important insights. First, he led by his own example, and so we are back at values. What is important about God? What is important about people? What is important about daily encounters?

Jesus was very open to the teaching moments which occurred in intersection with other people and by circumstances. To what degree do typical leadership training models follow this example? Research shows that leadership development happens best when people can practice the knowledge and skills they are learning right there in their everyday context.

**JACL:** How can leadership development happen outside the university setting? Not every leader can study for a Ph.D. in leadership.

**Baumgartner:** We have adopted one model into our program that can be used in any context—the experiential learning cycle. David Cobe—a cognitive psychologist and a researcher—developed this model. Cobe has discovered that experience can become true knowledge if it goes through a process of being transformed by reflection. We learn not only by experience, but also from the accumulative knowledge of the experience that has been generalized into models. We do not typically learn from models, though, unless we transform these models into a true knowledge.

**JACL:** How does this happen?

**Baumgartner:** By experimenting with the models. Thus, the experiential learning cycle takes experience, combines it with reflection, adds abstract knowledge and then leads back into experimenting with models into one cycle. Cobe postulates that true learning goes through the full cycle. All four aspects—experience, reflecting on experience, thinking about it in models and then experimenting in one’s own context, which becomes a new experience and the circle continues—is necessary for true learning.

**JACL:** Is the cycle of learning something people can learn on their own, or do

they need to go through your program?

**Baumgartner:** One of our competencies is developing others. Students take the model they experienced in our master's or doctoral program and scale it out into simple strategies of developing others. They train others to use the learning cycle while using the experiential cycle for themselves and growing their own leadership.

**JACL:** Are you saying that the learning cycle can be shared with others?

**Baumgartner:** The learning cycle is not only for individuals but is done also in a community. One of the most powerful insights we have gained from educational researchers is that you actually need a coach to transfer learned knowledge into your context effectively. A coach is someone who meets with you on a regular basis and helps you to understand what are you doing, how it is going, how well did you do, what went wrong, etc. This fosters the reflection process and also provides accountability to strengthen your commitment to experiment practically what you learned.

**JACL:** So leaders can learn on their own even by doing mistakes, but their reflection is more effective if they have someone they can be held accountable to?

## **The most effective leadership development programs happen in learning groups.**

**Baumgartner:** That's why the most effective leadership development programs happen in learning groups. Jesus himself created a learning group with the 12 apostles. One can learn in the classroom, but if you are breaking through old habits and making lasting change by developing new ones, there needs to be a certain intensity of focus and attention, and that happens in a small community (this is explained more in neuro-scientific studies). With peer coaching only, 85% of the participants were able to transfer their learning into their own context and keep it going. Without peer coaching, only 15% were able to do that.

**JACL:** If Christian leaders or pastors were part of a learning group, would that help them in their leadership growth and development?

**Baumgartner:** Yes, if the learning group secured mutual accountability. It is important particularly for leaders because it forces them to learn to co-lead in

an environment of intentional learning and change.

**JACL:** When starting, some leaders have their mentor and others do not. Is there a correlation between being mentored and growing to be successful?

**Baumgartner:** In ministry we find that about half of the graduates from the seminary give up ministry in the first five to ten years. It is very tough. I do not know if being “thrown into the water” contributes to that number, but it certainly would seem that not having an environment that encourages you when you make mistakes and when things are not going well will contribute to the failure factor in Christian ministry. On the other hand, just that you have a support group does not necessarily mean you will be effectively making it as a successful leader.

There is another element that we have not taken too seriously until now. Ministry is not only dealing with simple or complicated problems, but predictable problems. Ministry has to do with very complex situations and most of us learn only over time how to deal with them because it is so difficult to know what to do.

**JACL:** Can anybody become a leader then?

**Baumgartner:** If we understand leadership as the ability to influence others, there are different ways of influencing and, in that sense, even quiet people can influence and lead. But we have often conceptualized leaders as those with charisma. If leadership requires a charismatic gift that some have and some don't, then it is more difficult for some to lead than for others. However, the whole idea of leadership development is based on the assumption that leadership is not only a gift but is also something that can be developed.

**JACL:** Even leading through a change?

**Baumgartner:** There are some personalities that have it easier because they are more extroverted and less fearful, but there are many other aspects involved. Look at family systems and to what degree a person's own past and their family of origin predisposed them to be more or less comfortable with change or with conflict. When a person is a leader, they cannot escape conflict. But they can learn how to deal with conflict in more productive ways.

**JACL:** Would you like to emphasize any leadership trait that you find important for current leaders?



**Baumgartner:** I will mention a rather unusual trait. There are a number of traits described in literature, but I want to mention the ability of a leader to accept ambiguity. Today leadership often happens in context that is very dynamic. Circumstances are changing a lot. It is often not predictable what the next step should be. In socially complex situations the ability to be able to disappoint others without losing your credibility is an important trait in leadership and leadership development.

**JACL:** How do you develop such a trait?

**Baumgartner:** One needs to understand complexity on a deeper level. Leaders face many simple problems that can be easily fixed. If they are not able to solve them, they seek help from experts and that takes care of having leadership credibility, at least in the beginning. But as a leader gets into relationship with others, they will begin to see that there are other kinds of problems to deal with. Complicated problems are problems that are faced as an organization, as in an institution where the steps are known. But it gets complicated because there are many steps and many experts needed to work on them together. A leader's job—as a leader—is to coordinate these units to work together in such a way as to achieve something bigger. Between shooting a man to the moon by NASA and simple everyday issues is the vast field of leadership problems with which many leaders and institutions have to deal. Every time people say no to the leader, or they exercise their own will, the leader deals with the realm of complex problems. These encompass people unwilling to change, problems leading to conflicts, steps needing to be taken but which do not bring visible results immediately, churches facing the fact that people no longer care about going to church or listening to the pastor, you name it.

How do I lead my church to become more oriented towards those who are not yet part of God's Kingdom? Changing an existing church is probably one of the hardest challenges of leadership because of its complexity. A leader often does not have the answer, nor do they necessarily know the outcome. That means the leader needs to have tolerance towards ambiguity.

## **The most effective leadership development programs happen in learning groups.**

**JACL:** Are there any contemporary maladies that are passed on to new leaders today?

**Baumgartner:** There are many heroic leadership books in bookstores. Mayor Giuliani stood in the crisis of 9/11 as a pole of reassurance. “We are still here, we are not giving in, we will survive this.” Then he wrote a book, which became his story of leadership and some thought that he was thus qualified to become the president of the United States. While crisis leadership is important, it is often the least helpful aspect of leadership that is needed to be learned. Crisis is part of a larger picture, but to derive leadership quality from this heroic, crisis-oriented leadership is very misleading. I am not a specialist on presidential leadership, but it’s very interesting to see how in public leadership we move from one type of leadership to another, and each of these leaderships seem to have its strengths and weaknesses.

Going back to Christian leadership, there are Christian leaders needed today that have the courage to reexamine the mission of God here on earth for Christian organizations and churches. Such leaders often realize there is something new that is needed. The outcome, however, is not always clear, and it takes dedication of the whole team before the desired outcome appears. That is, in my opinion, one of the most important leadership qualities to which to aspire. It demands a different kind of leadership development process that is not only based on classes and books, but that is based on processes that we are only beginning to understand. These have something to do with the learning cycle—trying, reflecting, experiencing, thinking about it, going forward with trying something new, coming back and talking about it. It is, by far, not a straightforward process where there are lessons followed by tests resulting in a grade, and then a person becomes a leader. That is not how it works.

**JACL:** What encouragement or word of wisdom would you give to leaders who would like to actively join leadership development you just described?

**Baumgartner:** Whenever God intended to do something new in this world, it often came in a crisis and under very discouraging circumstances. Do not let circumstances pull you back from what God has called you to do. If God calls for a change, He is always using this method. Believing that God is active today, I know He has these kinds of leaders around the world right now. He has called them for a purpose and he is leading and training them Himself.

Would it be nice if we could learn from each other, get closer to each other? One of the goals of the leadership program at Andrews University is to be a program that appeals to these kinds of leaders. The program is job embedded. It is not school based, but competency based. You can use your own goals and aspirations for what you want to learn in the very situation God has put you

in, and we help you to become the person that you feel God wants you to be. We cannot tell you what that person looks like. That is what God needs to tell you. After 23 years of providing that experience, the leadership program is not perfect, but has a structured process that allows us to look back to the 250+ graduates and say it is amazing what these individuals have accomplished not only in their organizations but in the world. Some of them have touched the world in ways that we as a small university would have never imagined.

Outside of our leadership program, we hope that this *Journal of Applied Christian Leadership* may be a place where we share these kinds of experiences and insights that can be applied. We hope that leadership development can grow into a movement beyond measure.